

Anthós (1990-1996)

Volume 1 | Number 2

Article 5

1991

Shameless Shame: St. Augustine's Confessions

Regina Eastman
Portland State University

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives



Part of the [Ancient History, Greek and Roman through Late Antiquity Commons](#), and the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eastman, Regina (1991) "Shameless Shame: St. Augustine's Confessions," *Anthós (1990-1996)*: Vol. 1: No. 2, Article 5.
Available at: http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/anthos_archives/vol1/iss2/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthós (1990-1996)* by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

SHAMELESS SHAME: ST. AUGUSTINE'S CONFESSIONS

Regina Eastman

I n the introduction to his translation of the *Confessions* of St. Augustine John K. Ryan explains the underlying purpose of the book: "To become familiar with St. Augustine's confessions is to make it one's own, to some extent at least, an inexhaustible source of intellectual stimulation, of esthetic delight, of moral help, and of spiritual enlightenment." (18) With this phrase the translator, like Augustine himself, places the reader on a path that will lead to spiritual elevation. If followed correctly, the journey will lead to an understanding of God in a Augustinian manner; in other words, it should end with a conversion to Catholicism.

It seems evident that the reader's conversion was on Augustine's mind when he wrote the *Confessions*. The fast growth of Catholic faith throughout the Mediterranean and later throughout the whole civilized world, combined with the ceaseless praise of his book in the Christian world attests to Augustine's success.

But how was it possible for Christianity to become the official religion of the Roman Empire? The Mediterranean was, after all,

blooming with a wide variety of religions. They reached from the Greek and Roman Olympian traditions to different mystery religions. Which in turn had evolved out of older Greek, Persian, and Egyptian belief systems including the Orphic tradition, the Eleusinian and Samothracian Mysteries, the cult of Mithra and “every kind of god, monsters, and barking Anubis.” (183) Furthermore the Romans, who were normally joyously tolerant to any religion they encountered, initially had a distinct problem with the Christian belief system and its doctrines. For example, they thought Christianity to be a rather barbaric and superstitious form of worship, but more importantly they were not willing to stomach the Christian intolerance concerning an important Roman religious concept: the divinity of the Emperor and the worship of him as such.

Still the fact remains that by the fourth century this particular variant of a belief structure became accepted by the ruling class of the Roman Empire; under Constantine Christianity became the empire’s official religion. And this is where Augustine entered from upstage. He was born into this recent success of Christianity within the empire. It was a time of change and of metamorphosis. Augustine was aware of this fact and the possibilities of advancement it contained for him. Augustine was more than willing to nudge any pagan Roman, who was torn apart by the dichotomy of his own Greco-Roman culture and the new teachings, into the right direction, that is, Augustine’s direction and ultimately that of the powerful church. He would clarify questions any confused Christian contemporary of his may have been troubled with, and he would argue against false philosophies and theologies.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine made full use of his rhetorical powers of persuasion to further Christian religion and, last but not least, his career. As a Christian, I might argue that divine interference revealed God’s truth to the fallen souls and thus inspired them to find their home in the Catholic church. Augustine’s reasoning, cemented by a story told by Pontitianus (192), points at a similar direction: two special agents of the emperor happen to glance upon a Christian book and are miraculously converted (here the translator informs us that, apart from what Augustine relates, nothing further is known about

Ponticianus (395)—How far is Augustine's fertile imagination willing to go?). As a student of religious history, and after "the manner of the Academics (as they supposedly are)" (131) I waver with doubt. I will suggest that it is not necessarily divine revelation which moves the ruling class of Rome to convert, but I suspect that the conversion is a conscious and calculated strategy on the part of the new Roman leadership. With the rise of the military emperors the governing class undergoes a change. The old senatorial class, the patricians, who had been a dominating factor in the Roman Republic, did not disappear, but were relegated into the powerless background. They were replaced by a new group of people, who, through the ascent within the powerful military hierarchy, gained prestige, riches, and governmental authority. So, what does the new Roman executive do when he comes from the hinterland into a position of power? He needs an appropriate image. But what if he has no traditional, established, patrician heritage to fall back on? He invents a new tradition, preferably one that will distance him from the old societal patterns which are slowly fading away, and, equally important, one that corresponds with the emperor's own state of mind.

Constantine, who purposely broke with old traditions like separating military and civilian control, provided different avenues for himself and his court to carve out a new, more advanced identity for themselves, which would further distinguish them from the poorer senatorial class. Conversion to Christianity was one of them.

Augustine's *Confessions* made the metamorphosis easier. His emphasis pointed to an emotional, intellectual, philosophical, and spiritual explanation of and conversion to Christianity. In writing the book he was well aware of the diverse backgrounds of his readers. He felt his way into an intimate contact with the culturally differing values, customs attitudes and philosophies. Thus he intelligently employed literary forms familiar to the culture, such as the Greek epic, lyric poetry, Greek philosophy, Stoicism, and Epicureanism. In doing so, he forced almost any possible reader to agree with his teachings. He alluringly asserted that there are "men who neither wore themselves out in search of truth, nor meditated for ten years and more on such things, win wings for their readier shoulders." (194)

These are Plato's words in the *Phaedrus*, where he states that the souls of philosophers receive wings for flight more easily than lesser men (396). But Augustine does not mention that. He makes subliminal use of the Platonic phrase by presenting an inverted image of it. It follows that any man, even one who does little soul searching, is able to receive God.

Augustine speaks to the highly educated pagan Roman as well as to the more ritually oriented lower-class Christian. He mentions the conversion of the pagan Victorinus, "highly skilled in all liberal studies" who "had even merited and obtained a statute in the Roman forum as a memorial of his outstanding teaching, which citizens of this world deem a great honor." (183) What a coincidence. This man came to profess his faith and "did not blush to become the child of your Christ." (183) Augustine's mother Monica, who was unwavering in her love for the unworthy son (just like God), had a simpler nature and felt the need for ritual, "as was her custom in Africa" (134). When she learned that St. Ambrose himself had prohibited her practice she "accepted it in so devout and obedient a manner that I myself wondered how easily she became an accuser of her custom rather than an objector to his command." (134) What a strange and degrading thing for Augustine to say about his devoted mother.

Another feature in his writing that seems inappropriate is Augustine's preference for aggressive, yet sensual, sexual and, at times, even pornographic language. There are countless examples, such as: "Nor would I have needed to arouse the itch of my desires by a rubbing together of guilty minds." (74) Is he making clumsy concessions to the erotic aspect of Greco-Roman culture? Or is the subconscious scratching the surface?

In any case, to accommodate his audience to accommodate him Augustine will go to great length. He, thus, recreates the movement of Virgil's *Aeneid* by giving us the image of his soul's journey home:

"I was required to learn by heart I know not how many of Aeneas' wanderings, although forgetful of my own, and to weep over Dido's death, because she killed herself for love, when all the while amid such things, dying to you, O God my life, I most wretchedly bore myself about with dry eyes." (56)

Here Augustine plays on cultural preferences, instills guilt at the same time, and thus successfully sets in motion the mechanics of a shame culture. As Charles Rowan Beye points out in *Ancient Greek Literature and Society*, publicly emphasizing the reader's inferiority "is crucial in a society where a sense of self comes from external substantiation." (38)

Augustine suffers through learning into realization of God in a Sophoclean manner (Oedipus), and he presents us with a Christian epic of his own experience which follows classical Greek tradition. Furthermore, he puts himself within the Orphic tradition by tracing his ascent from the underworld into the light.

In this sense Augustine writes as an apologist to the Greco-Roman audience, which thinks of Christianity as a vulgar eastern superstition. He writes to have them recognize that what they find satisfactory within Greek tradition, that which makes their world understandable and which gives them direction, can and must, if they want to move forward into learning, become part of their Christian experience. Compare, for instance, Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium* to Augustine's "A Momentary Vision":

"It is necessary for the one proceeding in the right way toward his goal to begin, when he is young, with physical beauty; and first of all, if his guide directs him properly, to love one person, and in his company to beget beautiful ideas and then to observe that the beauty in one person is related to the beauty of another. If he must pursue physical beauty, he would be very foolish not to realize that the beauty in all persons is one and the same. When he has come to this conclusion, he will become the lover of all beautiful bodies and will relax the intensity of his love for one and think the less of it as something of little account. Next he will realize that beauty in the soul bodies and will relax the intensity of his love for one and think the less of it as something of little account. Next he will realize that beauty in the soul is more precious than that in the body, so that if he meets with a person who is beautiful in his soul, even if he has little of the physical bloom of beauty, this will be enough and he will love and cherish him and beget beautiful ideas that make young men better, so that he will in turn be forced to see the beauty in morals and laws and that the beauty in them all is related."

While Plato writes for the Greek aristocracy, and is a philosopher, Augustine writes with the certainty of a theologian who knows that revelation is accessible to any person who wants to know God:

“Searching into why it was that I gave approval to the beauty of the bodies,..., I had found that immutable, true, and eternal truth which exists above my changeable mind. Thus I gradually passed from bodies to the soul which perceives by means of the body...thence again to the reasoning power, to which what is apprehended by the bodily senses is referred for judgement. When this power found itself to be in me a variable thing, it raised itself up to its understanding. It removed its thought from the tyranny of contradictory phantasms. In this way it might find that light by which it was sprinkled, when it cried out, that beyond all doubt the immutable must be preferred to the mutable. Hence it might come to know this immutable being, for unless it could know it in some way, it could in no wise have set it with certainty above the mutable...Then indeed I clearly saw your “invisible things, understood by the things which are made.”(175,176)

It seems highly probable that Augustine’s “vision” with the “flash of its trembling sight” (176) was inspired by his careful study of Neoplatonist literature. He transcends, and at the same time makes more concrete, Plato’s four stages of growth; they become accessible to the fallen soul. (Augustine writes his book in a manner which suggests he is having an intimate conversation with a loving father/mother-figure. The reader gets the impression that it is only by chance that this oral epic has been printed in a book.) The whole movement of the *Confessions*, from the focus on the physical beauty of the body to the abstract understanding of the metaphysical beauty of God himself, reflects the four levels of meaning (with Christian accents) which classical scholarship had developed. It is, in fact, this very structure which gives unity to the three seemingly diverse parts of the *Confessions*. Augustine certainly drew on the great pagan Neoplatonist philosopher/theologian Plotinus, whose thought he copied in a manner which reminds of a plagiarizing student who knowingly hides his sources. He parallels Plotinus’ process of the three-fold fall. It begins with pride (“The Psychology of Infancy”)

which leads to concupiscence (“A Student at Carthage”), and then goes on to curiosity (“False Philosophy and False Theology”), in which state the soul faces loss of being—only to begin the movement back to God. “By continence we are gathered together and brought back to the One, from which we have dissipated our being into many things.”(256)

Augustine’s powers of leading argument on an intercultural level were certainly far advanced and have served their intended purpose well. Catholicism put aside, I cannot negate the validity of the spiritual insight; I was intrigued by his concept of time. On the other hand, I cannot help but recognize that Augustine’s slick talent has enabled him and the Catholic faith to catch the greatest number of souls possible—to the profit of his own career, to the glory of his church, and to the misery of many. Augustine’s religious ethnocentrism (and that of the translator) can easily be insulting and provoking to one who is not at home with the Christian God. There is a shameless shame about his chameleonic manipulations.